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Ag bill should bolster privately owned forests

By Bob Bendick

Have you ever been driving along a Kentucky highway, with nothing but large swaths of forestland on either side of you? Such scenes provide comfort, convincing us that with such vast tree-lined roads and forested hills, the outlook for our environment cannot possibly be so bleak.

But the fact is that with rising taxes, urban development, soaring land prices and shifts in the wood-products markets, economic pressures for forest owners have never been greater.

Families and individuals -- not the government or timber companies -- own the bulk of Kentucky's forests (nearly 90 percent of them). As these families are being forced to choose between ever-increasing costs to maintain their forested lands and lucrative development opportunities, the risk of losing our forest heritage is at an all-time high.

Kentucky ranks second nationally in hardwood production. Compared to other manufacturing sectors, forestry ranks third in employment in Kentucky, employing 37,000 residents and paying annual compensation of more than \$600 million. Combined, the annual impact of Kentucky's forest industries is \$8.7 billion.

Kentuckians also depend on family owned forests for outdoor recreation. Each year, nearly 3 million people fish, hunt or engage in other forms of wildlife-related recreation, spending more than \$3 billion annually. And nearly 90 percent of those who hunt do so on private lands.

Kentucky has more running water than any of the other lower 48 states. The water in Kentucky's forests provides not only habitat for numerous species of animals but also filters pollutants from the state's drinking water.

In short, there is much to lose in Kentucky. Annually between 1997 and 2002, an average of 48,360 acres of rural land was developed in Kentucky, which is the equivalent of paving an area larger than Louisville every year.

Considering the many essential public values at stake, the forestry and conservation sections of the farm bill should be amended to use a comparatively small amount of public dollars to invest in private lands that are worth billions and provide benefits to all.

In addition to securing the nation's food supply, the farm bill provides the single largest

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source of funding for conservation in the United States. The Wetlands Reserve Program is among the most notable of conservation programs covered by the farm bill.

When Congress debates the content of the farm bill this year, we must recognize that these programs, which have proven so valuable to farmers, can be applied to help family forest owners keep and better manage their land.

We support:

- Increasing the funding and coordinating the delivery of the many programs that assist rural landowners in managing their lands to conserve soil, water quality and wildlife habitat.
- Expanding those programs that pay landowners for the restoration and long-term conservation of forest lands in environmentally sensitive areas, such as the highly successful Wetlands Reserve Program.
- Creating a program for community-owned forests that can serve as buffers on the urban fringe.
- Designing a well-funded initiative to respond to natural disasters such as fires and hurricanes that damage important forests.
- Ensuring that incentives for forest-based energy production maintain the environmental values of forested landscapes.

Families that have done so much to conserve our nation's -- and this state's -- forests take great pride and satisfaction in their stewardship. But in a rapidly changing world, it would be a mistake to assume these woods will always be there for the benefit of society without proactive policy changes and assistance.

Cost-effective investment through the farm bill's conservation programs can ensure healthy and productive forests will grace America's hills and valleys for generations to come.

Bob Bendick is managing director of the Southern Conservation Region of The Nature Conservancy.



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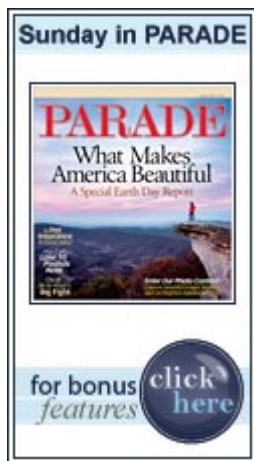
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